



Holding Protest Posters and Handheld Consoles: Activism in *Animal Crossing: New Horizons*

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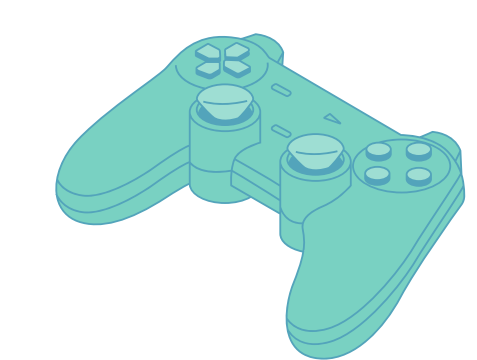
Abstract

The video game *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* (ACNH) was released in March 2020 just as the world was going into lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Designed for children ages 3 and up, ACNH hosts a large player base from a wide variety of ages. For many, the idea of building an idyllic, remote island and connecting with friends online has been a valuable outlet in a time of isolation. For activists, it offers a space for engaging in collective action.

Megan Musgrave coins the term “imaginary activism” to refer to the way activism in youth literature incorporates “reactions on the part of fictional characters, imaginative responses on the part of engaged readers, and the positioning toward real-world activism that potentially results from such imaginative responses” (xx). ACNH serves as an interactive youth text ripe for real-world applications of this. Summer 2020 saw an increase in ACNH gatherings to protest on behalf of Black Lives Matter, the Climate Strike, and Hong Kong independence. While thousands hit the streets, others simulated the experience in the virtual world.

Viewing ACNH as a children’s literature text, this research examines the activist practices of *Animal Crossing* discourse communities in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Musgrave claims virtual activism “is becoming the 21st century’s most effective mode of building an engaged citizenship” (174). In a time when it becomes increasingly difficult to gather, virtual activism in video games has been crucial to facilitating collective action and encouraging people to participate in cultural conversations about key social justice issues. Youth literature has long been a site for subversive work, and ACNH serves as a crucial site of inquiry regarding activism during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Methodology



This research is informed by my hands-on experience in the game; visiting other players’ islands; researching player-created designs in the custom design portal.



Players created discourse communities on social media platforms, particularly in Facebook groups (for the United States). In the wake of several violent attacks on Black victims, including Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbery, and George Floyd, Black Lives Matter designs became more relevant. Several controversies arose as some online communities, such as Nookazon, were accused of disallowing the mention of the BLM movement on discord. With the rise in racial justice protests in Summer 2020, several groups wrote statements and/or revised rules to advocate for inclusion and for the protection of Black lives. Many conversations about these rules, or about custom designs created in protest, led to political disagreements. In some groups, more conservative members left, sometimes starting their own group that either showed support for police or disallowed any mention of politics or protest. Still, membership in these groups continued to grow. Several new groups were created as safe spaces for BIPOC and LGBTQIA+ people, too.



Protest designs and activities were often shared on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest. In the United States, much organizing happens on Facebook and Twitter as well as in Discord.



Because video games are inherently multimodal and relevant to multiple disciplines, this research was informed by scholarship in activist rhetoric, children’s literature, and game studies. In particular, Musgrave’s *Imaginary Activism* and Gray and Leonard’s *Woke Gaming: Digital Challenges to Oppression and Social Injustice* were central to this research.



I also drew from many news articles that were written about these activist campaigns. These articles themselves participated in the discourse surrounding said activist movements and helped to spread awareness about important social justice issues.

Examples



Black Lives Matter protests



Climate Strike



Hong Kong protests

Results

The release of ACNH coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and a summer rife with protest. offered a digital space for creative expression and escapism, which became even more popular than expected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The game—which gives you your own idyllic island and friendly animal neighbors—provided a much-needed escapist fantasy during the pandemic, allowing players to interact with loved ones in a safe space. Because of this kairotic moment, the game became a valuable tool for activists and community organizers, such as the Pro-Democracy Hong Kong movement, Black Lives Matter movement, global climate strike, and Pride celebrations. The activism that takes place is driven by players using game mechanics such as custom-designed clothing, flooring, and objects; the ability to gather with up to 9 people on one island; the speech and reaction functions; and the formation of discourse communities in social media spaces.

The game is limited in its ability to organize in large-scale ways, as you can only have 9 people on an island. That’s where online discourse communities come in, though; what happens on a single digital island gets shared online with others who are also engaging in similar activities, thus spreading awareness about the specific topic and building relationships between activists across the globe. In particular, pro-democracy Hong Kong protestors faced dangers outside of COVID; they were also vulnerable to being killed or disappeared. ACNH served as a space to gather safely, retain some anonymity, and be protected from bodily harm. Discourse circulated among ACNH communities just as it did via zines. In retaliation for this activism, China banned the sale of ACNH from Chinese stores.

During the 2020 U.S. election, the Biden-Harris team created an island where you could meet the candidates’ avatars and learn information about how to register to vote. They also created campaign images that players could use on their own island, including the official Biden-Harris logo, a “Team Joe” logo, and a pride-themed logo. Senator Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez took to Twitter to announce she would visit other players’ islands, leaving drawings and notes on their town square bulletin board (a common practice for visitors). KFC created an entire KFC island as part of a digital marketing campaign, offering free chicken vouchers for their Philippines branches. What is potentially a tool for grassroots organizing and getting the word out about important social justice movements can just as easily be used as a tool by politicians and corporations to build brand awareness and contribute to various currencies.



Conclusion

In my research, I seek to bridge activist rhetoric and children’s literature scholarship in order to examine cultural discourses surrounding activist movements. ACNH serves as a valuable text for thinking about who protests, how, and what textual productions go into these practices. Still, it’s important to remember that ACNH is not itself an activist text; it’s what the players do with it that matters. Ultimately, the organizing that happens in the game helps amplify public discourse about important social justice issues.

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